

Memories of a true friend of Aruba: Dr. John Leach, education pioneer



During the meeting at the San Nicolas library yesterday



Dr. Leach and his students at the library, 1998

Many individuals on Aruba were saddened to hear of the passing of Dr. John Leach, associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the Neag School of Education, as part of the University of

Connecticut. He died on May 27 at the age of 84 of cancer, but was so vital and active right up until his passing, that some of his former students who still remained in close contact report being surprised

by his death.

Dr. Leach was a steadfast friend of Aruba, fascinated by the island's multicultural and multilingual qualities, which were his principal subjects of education, along with Second



Language Acquisition and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

For nearly 25 years, Dr. Leach, originally from Panama, promoted and conducted a field trip to Aruba annually with the students of his Multilingual/Multicultural Education Systems course. Many of those students became equally fascinated with Aruba and devotees of the island, purchasing timesharing at the Renaissance Resort and continuing to return with Pro-

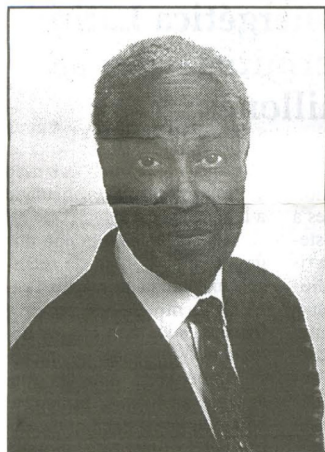
fessor Leach each year to repeat his course, well beyond obtaining their degrees.

Seven have returned to Aruba this year, and with staff from the San Nicolas branch of Aruba's National Library, paid tribute to the man who had introduced them to Aruba, made it the subject of his doctoral thesis, and who believed the island was a shining example of how individuals of differing cultures could live together in harmony.

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Dr. Leach

Visiting the island this year and sharing their recollections of Dr. Leach are Charlie Ortiz, Pedro Segarra, Victor Agosto and his sister Hilda, along with Faye Hudson, joined by her friend Diane Childress, who is a first time visitor.

Delores Graham, former director of the University of Hartford Department of Urban/Multicultural Education, has been a part of the group since 1997, though not a student of Dr. Leach, he convinced her she had to come to

Aruba to witness the wonder of the island's cultural and lingual diversity first hand. "I decided to experience the class after his raving about Aruba for so many years," she explains. "The first day we were here Faye and I fell in love with the island, the second day we bought timeshares. This is how it has gone with many of his students."

"Dr. Leach was so invested in Aruba and the culture that it was easy for him to bring people to Aruba. It takes a special person to convince you to come to such an island as this not for the beaches; but for the people, the culture, and its uniqueness, he made it sound so interesting," reports Pedro.

"While Dr. Leach was working on his doctoral thesis, he spent a great of his time in the library in San Nicolas," explains Delores, "so he had a special connection and affection for the library and its staff. He was very much impressed with the school system in Aruba. Being an educator he was naturally interested in the number of languages taught and how students

progress from grade to grade. The various cultures here and how they get along, living in tranquility, peace and harmony, was a source of endless enjoyment for him."

"Every year, whether you were in the program or not, you would get your invitation and schedule for the annual trip," recalls Charlie. "There was always the regular visit to the San Francisco Church, the Bon Bini Festival, and studying the development of the island, keeping up with all the changes that have taken place, and daily workshops. When we returned to the school we presented papers on our experience and what we had learned, examining all aspects of the Aruban society and our impressions," she adds.

"In the late sixties and early seventies, there was a great push in Connecticut to develop bilingual programs because of the increasing number of Hispanic students," mentioned Pedro, "and colleges were under pressure to develop programs and to teach teachers how to teach multilingual populations. I believe that is originally why he came to Aruba; it was his research tool to support his doctoral thesis. However, Dr. Leach was very unique; in academia, you have professors that teach you a course and then they are done with you. With Dr.

Leach's course, you could come back year after year, without paying tuition; you were always welcome to join in. We were still students, learning along with the others, which often included professors as well as students, and we all learned from each other and the experience. We still are, and are learning even from this visit," he explains.

Yesterday, the group visited Aruba's National Library to present a picture of Dr. Leach and a memorial plaque they had made to staff of the San Nicolas Branch. Graciela Nedd and Judith Ling, long time friends of Dr. Leach accepted, with Michelle Boekhoudt of the board of directors.

In return, the San Nicolas branch presented the group with a book the library had obtained for Dr. Leach in anticipation of his annual summer trip to the island. "He had been searching for this book for so long," reports Graciela of "El Papiamento," a study of the language made by Dr. Rudolfo Lenz of the University of Chile in 1928. The students will present the book to Dr. Leach's widow, Sofia.

In addition to his annual visit, Dr. Leach brought with him each year a donation of research texts for Aruba's library, and the group have arranged to fill a shopping list for the library this year, in his

memory, and continue the tradition.

On Tuesday, July 28, Jubi Naar, host of the weekly Bon Bini Festival at Fort Zoutman, paid loving tribute to his personal long time friend, as Dr. Leach made a visit to the weekly cultural festival a requirement for his students, which they always enjoyed. Jubi and all those who knew Dr. Leach expressed their sincere grief at the passing of this great friend of Aruba.

However, his students also felt he had given them the greatest gift in discovering a place which he believed demonstrated how diverse cultures can live together in harmony, enjoying and encouraging their differences, and this is his greatest legacy for which he will be remembered by hundreds of former students and friends.